DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 074 552 CS 500 208

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TITLE Onomatopoeia, Gesture, and Synaesthesia in the Perception of Poetic Meaning.
PUB DATE Dec 72
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Assn. (58th, Chicago, December 27-30, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Auditory Perception; Aural Stimuli; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Critical Reading; *Interpretive Reading; Language Rhythm; Literary Analysis; Oral Expression; *Phonetics; *Poetry; Speech; *Symbolism

ABSTRACT

The author states that phonetic symbolism is not a generalizable phenomenon but maintains that those interested in the status of a poem as a speech event need not totally discount or discredit such perceptions. In his discussion of the theories which ascribe meaning to vocal utterance--the two imitative theories, the onomatopoeic and the gestural, and the theories of synaesthesia and kinaesthesia--he describes and demonstrates how the various kinds of speech symbolism are found in individual words and in poetic lines and passages. Taking issue with Samuel Johnson's treatment of a passage from Pope's "Odyssey," the author criticizes Johnson's failure to discern the part played by phonetic symbolism in relation to the poem's meaning and rhythm. The author concludes that oral interpretation reinforces the onomatopoeic and gestural imitating, the auditory perception of visual and tactile imagery through synaesthesia, and the kinesthetic perception of resonance, tension, and relaxation. (LG)

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ONOMATOPOEIA, GESTURE, AND SYNAESTHESIA IN THE PERCEPTION OF POETIC MEANING

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Submitted Paper delivered at Speech Communication Association National Convention

December, 1972

In a discussion of the sound values in Richard Wilbur's poem, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," May Swenson notes the predominance of the vowel sounds (ɑɪ), (i), and (eɪ) and the consonant sound (l) in the first half of the poem and the vowel sound (ʌ) and consonant (k) in the second half. She says, "The lower part of the poem takes on a darker, harder cast for me, partly because of this, while the upper poem is higher pitched, lighter, more fluid." Wilbur responds to Miss Swenson in the symposium on his poem by saying that he finds her remarks on sound "extremely interesting" and that while "most poets would not be conscious of selecting i-sounds or e-sounds in composing a particular passage," still he is "sure that one's feeling of 'rightness' in a developing poem must often depend on the half-concious achievement of appropriate vowel-and-consonant color."

Having said this much, both feel constrained to say more. Miss Swenson: "The response to sound in a poem is so subjective that it has not as much value for analysis as does image . . . . These sonic impressions I believe to be too personal to carry any but secondary importance for the interpretation of content, although they sharpen my total appreciation." And Wilbur agrees that "what sounds are appropriate to what ideas" is "a relatively subjective matter."[1]

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It is as though Miss Swenson and Mr. Wilbur are aware they are on unsure ground and must retreat from their tentative advances. Surely there is hardly any topic more replete with pitfalls than that of phonetic symbolism. Professor Breen's chapter on the subject in Literature as Experience is a balanced study that seems to leave him, somewhat like the poets, alternately tantalized and skeptical.[2] The tendency of many writers about poetry has been to ignore or dismiss the possibilities of phonetic symbolism entirely.[3] Several have treated of meter and rhythm in relation to sense in ways that would have profited from considering the contributions of phonetic symbolism.[4]

As part of our continuing interest in conferring upon a poem its status as speech event, and hopefully keeping my own balance, I should like first to explore three prominent theories that ascribe meaning to vocal utterance and then attempt to show, as one example, how a renowned commentator failed almost completely to take such suggestive factors into account.

The three theories are the two imitative theories, namely, the onomatopoeic and the gestural, and the theory of synaesthesia. Brown, Black, and Horowitz summarize the two imitative theories:

> The onomatopoeia theory holds that vocal sound can suggest nonvocal sound. The gestural theory holds that motion and contour described by articulatory muscles can suggest motion and contour in the external world.[5]

The theory of synaesthesia suggests that significance can derive from vocal sound acting on the other senses through the sense of hearing.

There is, first of all, little doubt that some of the sounds of language do imitate nonvocal sound, that they are onomatopoeic, "hiss," "murmur," "cuckoo," for example. That such words often play an important part in

poetry is obvious. We need only cite such verses as Dryden's "The trumpet's loud clangour excites us to arms," Poe's "Tintinabulation of the bells," Milton's "Brusht with the hiss of rustling wings."

In dealing with sound imitation in poetry, Wellek and Warren distinguish from onomatopoeia in individual words another kind which might be called "collective onomatopoeia." They refer to

> elaborate sound-painting, the reproduction of natural sounds through speech-sounds in context where words, in themselves quite devoid of onomatopoeic effects, will be drawn into a sound pattern . . .[6]

Such an imitative effect is gained from the word "innumberable" in the Tennyson line, "the murmuring of innumerable bees."[7] The word itself may have no imitative origin or intent, but it serves such a function in the sound context of the line.

The second imitative theory, the "gestural" theory, goes beyond sheer sound imitation and suggests that the organs of speech in the process of making sounds imitate the contour and motion of the external world. Such words as "bubble," "scoop," "ooze" may be examples. No sound is imitated, except perhaps in "bubble," but, rather, the organs of speech imitate an external shape or motion. Browning's line, "Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff" involves a gestural imitation of a described action; the effect is not due sheerly to alliteration, but to the many plosive utterances, which are physical counterparts to the sense of the line, especially noteworthy in "brittle" and "stubble."

Thirdly, the theory of synaesthesia holds that sound falling on the ear will arouse certain meanings associated with the other senses.[8] "Shimmer" and "glitter" are examples here. Wellek and Warren refer to this phenomenon when they treat of "sound-symbolism or sound-metaphor."[9] They cite

Albert Wellek's study which proved by acoustic experiments that front, unrounded vowels like (eɪ) and (i) are associated with "thin, quick, clear, and bright objects" while back, rounded vowels like (oʊ) and (u) are associated with "clumsy, slow, dull, and dark objects."[10] What is referred to here is the effect of the vowels rather than the manner in which they are produced. The sheer sound of the different vowels to the ear has a "meaning" as interpreted by the other senses, particularly the senses of sight and touch.

The following brief poetic excerpts can be considered for the effect of the predominant vowel sounds in the accented syllables of each. In "The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me," Delmore Schwartz speaks of the "inescapable animal" body who

> Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,
> A caricature, a swollen shadow,
> A stupid clown of the spirit's motive.[11]

These lines utilize in several of the accented syllables the back vowels (u), "moves," "move," "stupid"; (oʊ), "swollen," "motive"; (ɔ), "distorting"; and (aʊ), "clown." The vowel sounds here may be perceived to convey some of the clumsiness, dullness, slowness, and perhaps darkness of "the heavy bear." On the other hand, Richard Wilbur, in capturing the action of the "Juggler," lets chiefly the lighter front vowels play upon our ears, and a corresponding suggestive effect on the other senses can be noted:

> Whee, in the air
> The balls roll round, wheel on his wheeling hands,
> Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres
> Grazing his finger ends,
> Cling to their courses there,
> Swinging a small heaven about his ears.[12]

Of course, there are other factors in both these passages. The sense and rhythm have much to do with the contrasting effect in each. But the (i)

in "Whee," "wheel," "wheeling," the (I) in "spheres," "finger," "cling," "swinging," and "ears," the diphthong (ɑɪ) in "lightness," the (eɪ) in "ways," and "grazing," the (ɛ) in "ends," "heaven," "air" and "there," all front vowels, may have an effect on the other senses through the ear of quickness, clearness, and perhaps brightness.

The suggestive character of this synaesthesia of vocal sound cannot, of course, be analyzed too literally or precisely. It remains at best suggestive, but one need not look for the universal application of the effect nor for one-to-one relationships between sound and other imagery. If vocal sound in some way interconnects with the other senses and suggests a "meaning" in those modalities, it has a place in the appreciation of poetry.

These then are the three general theories of sound significance, the onomatopoeic, the gestural, and synaesthesia, the interconnection of the senses. One is tempted to posit a fourth that the others do not quite cover. For what is one to say of the effect on the reader who pronounces the following lines aloud?

> My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
> My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
> Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
> One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

The profusion of nasal sounds makes for a kind of droning, soporific effect on the ear that tends to dull the senses. But it is not only an effect gained through the ear. The continuous resonance called for by the nasals, plus the pervasive oral and laryngeal vibration of the (z) sounds, the almost physical "numbing" of the lips through endless repetitions of bilabials (m) (p) (w), induces a direct, physical lulling such as one might experience on a gently vibrating couch. This is no mere imitation of external sounds or motions or contours, nor is it the effect of synaesthesia as this is ordinarily understood. Yet is is an effect, a "meaning" of

the sound of the poem that is relevant to the "sense." It has in common with synaesthesia that it is an influence on the other senses. It has in common with the gestural that it is based on the movement of the vocal organs. But it is not an effect of sound on the ear as such, nor is it imitative. It seems largely a kinesthetic effect, deriving from awareness of muscle tension and relaxation.

Such factors, onomatopoeia, gesture, synaesthesia, kinaesthesia, have commonly been overlooked, often times underestimated, and sometimes ridiculed, in the treatment of poetry. And while it is appropriate to ridicule an extreme position on this issue, it is well to recognize such factors of poetic utterance when they are really in play.

Let me now turn, therefore, to one example of a poetic passage in which a master has been at work in the utilization of such elements and a famous critic, in treating of the passage, has missed almost the entire point. The passage is from Alexander Pope's Odyssey, and Samuel Johnson considers it in his biography of Pope.

Dr. Johnson, of course, has great respect for meter and rhythm in poetry. What he objects to is the idea of "representative meter," that the motion and duration of a passage can be attributed to the peculiar adaptation of its rhythmic sound to its sense. Johnson indicates that motion and duration are hard to suggest in our language because there is little flexibility in the rhythm. He then considers the Pope example:

> Motion, however, may be in some sort examplified; and yet it may be suspected that even in such resemblances the mind often governs the ear, and the sounds are estimated by their meaning. One of the most successful attempts has been to describe the labour of Sisyphus:

> With many a weary step, and many a groan,
> Up a high hill he heaves a huge round stone;
> The huge found stone, resulting with a bound,
> Thunders impetuous down, and smoaks along the ground.

Who does not perceive the stone to move slowly upward, and roll violently back? But set the same numbers to another sense;

> While many a merry tale, and many a song,
> Chear'd the rough road, we wish'd the rough road long.
> The rough road then, returning in a round,
> Mock'd our impatient steps, for all was fairy ground.

We have now surely lost much of the delay, and much of the rapidity.[13]

Dr. Johnson's great authority and common sense, plus the care he has taken to compose some lines of his own, seem to have won a major point. But it shall be worthwhile to take a closer look at what he and Pope have done.

Johnson assumes that Pope's effect is conveyed mainly by the sense rather than the rhythm. He therefore contrives a composition of his own with the same rhythm and a different sense to show that a different motion and duration will be perceived that can then only be attributable to the sense. Johnson is correct in noting that the effect of Pope's lines is not alone attributable to the rhythm, but the effect is not due solely to the sense either. He overlooks the durational factors and quality of motion derived from the phonetic characteristics of the passage.

The dramatic effect of Pope's second line, for example, is due to the great effort expended in repeating the five (h) sounds. Hardly any sound of the language requires more breath, and therefore more effort, to produce than this because the only sound is that of air rushing through partially closed vocal cords. There is no "voice" in the sound, only breath, and anyone who has any breath left at the end of this line has a good "wind" supply and strong stomach muscles. It might also be noted that the sound

of "panting" when we are physically exhausted is exactly the repetition of this (h) sound. In addition, Pope's line contains six long vowel sounds, the long vowel (i) in "he" and "heaves," the three diphthongs (always comparatively long because they are composed of two vowel sounds), (aɪ), (ju), and (oʊ) in "high," "round," and "stone," and the consonant-vowel glide (ju) in "huge." Johnson's second line, on the other hand, contains no (h) sounds and only two long vowels, the (oʊ) in "road" twice.

Four other features of this same line by Pope should be mentioned: the gesturally imitative high front vowels of "high hill he heaves," the imitative lip rounding in "huge round stone," the suggestion through synaesthesia of clumsiness and slowness in the back vowels of this last phrase (repeated in the next line) and the kinaesthetic difficulty of uttering the two consonant sounds (v) and (z) in "heaves" and the affricate (dʒ) in "huge."

The effect in Pope's line of great and lengthy effort is achieved by using many elements of gestural imitation, synaesthesia, and kinaesthesia that are indicative of the meaning. The total effect is not only of slow motion but of effortful motion, and even the rhythm of the line is not only a question of the "numbers" or meter but of the kinds and combinations of consonant and vowel sounds.

In Pope's last two lines it does not seem to be a matter so much of speed, as Dr. Johnson says, as of a great, unleashed weight. The somewhat onomatopoeic "thunders" with its resonanting (n) cut short by the plosive (d) cannot be compared with the longer "mock'd our." Also there is both a greater harshness by synaesthesia to the ear and a greater kinaesthetic effort and release in utterance with the (tʃ) in "impetuous" than with the (ʃ) in "impatient." In addition, the consistently back, rounded vowels

in the accented syllables of "smoaks along the ground" can suggest a clumsy, dark, heavy object one would in no way associate with the lighter "fairy" of Johnson's line. The total effect of a giant, lurching force in Pope's last two lines is carried to a noticeable degree by these mimetic and associational elements.

The effect of Pope's lines, which Johnson at first acknowledges, is achieved in ways of which Johnson does not seem to be aware since he attributes the effect almost exclusively to sense. His own lines have transformed not only the sense but the gestured speech and sound of Pope's lines. Johnson would protest that in his own lines he has kept the rhythm, which is true as to the degree of accent required, but not as to the duration and effort of pronouncing the syllables. To sum up, Johnson's opinion that "the mind often governs the ear, and the sounds are estimated by their meaning" does not hold up anywhere near as well as he has presumed (even on the very battleground of the poem he has chosen to demonstrate his point).

Dr. Johnson, of course, is not the last or only advocate of such an opinion. When William Empson puts it simply "that very similar devices of sound may correspond effectively to very different meanings,"[14] we know that it is not quite so simple or clear a case as that. May Swenson can trust her sonic impressions more than she thought. And as for Wilbur, he can trust his too, but we certainly would not press him to be self-conscious about it in composing his next poem.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the oral interpreter should listen for and attempt to experience bodily, values and characteristics of utterance in a poem, and without being dogmatic or absolute, can justifiably demonstrate and assert to others such values when they appear.

It seems safe to say that oral interpretation is the best approach to appreciating such values in poetry even if one is not precisely aware of why the words as spoken have the effects they do. Reading aloud tends to enforce the onomatopoeic and gestural imitating, the auditory perception of visual and tactile imagery through synaesthesia, and the kinesthetic perception of resonance, tension, and relaxation. The poem as a physical act of speech is, among other things, the poem oral interpretation can help discover and appreciate.

FOOTNOTES

[1]"On Richard Wilbur's 'Love Calls Us to the Things of This World,'" The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic, Eight Symposia, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston, 1964), pp. 16-17.

[2]Wallace A. Bacon and Robert S. Breen, Literature as Experience (New York, 1959), pp. 275-294.

[3]I.A. Richards is one who flippantly dismisses phonetic symbolism. See Ivor Armstrong Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York, 1936), pp. 60-62. William Empson builds his case for verbal analysis by rejection of what he calls the "Pure Sound" approach to poetry. See Seven Types of Ambiguity, 3rd ed. (Cleveland, 1955), pp. 11-26.

[4]For twentieth century examples, see Ivor Armstrong Richards, Practical Criticism, Harvest ed. (New York, 1963, 1st ed., 1929), pp.220-221; W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M.C. Beardsley, "The Concept of Meter: an Exercise in Abstraction," PMLA, LXXIV (1959); and Don Geiger, title essay in The Sound, Sense, and Performance of Literature (Chicago, 1963), pp. 31-54.

[5]Roger W. Brown, Abraham H. Black and Arnold E. Horowitz, "Phonetic Symbolism in Natural Languages," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, L (1955), 392.

[6]René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 2nd ed. (New York, 1956), p. 150.

[7]Wellek and Warren, p. 150.

[8]This should be distinguished from "synaesthesia" as it is sometimes employed in literary criticism: "The use of terms applicable to one sense to describe the sensations of another," (emphasis supplied), H.L. Yelland, S.C.J. Jones and K.S.W. Easton, A Handbook of Literary Terms (New York, 1950), p. 202.

For an example of this latter use of the concept, see Walter J. Bate's discussion of synaesthesia in Keats's poetry, Major British Writers, ed. Walter J. Bate, et al., enlarged ed. (New York, 1959), II, 320. This usage is found in such phrases as Keats's "the touch of scent" or in lines like Edith Sitwell's "And the snow falls, as sharp and bright, unripe and sour/ As the budding grapes' bright perfume." Both forms of synaesthesia are found in poetry, often together, but it is the actual interplay of the senses rather than the verbal indication of this interplay with which this paper is concerned.

[9]Wellek and Warren, p. 150.

[10]Albert Wellek, "Der Sprachgeist als Doppelempfinder," Zeitschrift für Ästhetik, XXV(1931), pp. 226-62, cited in Wellek and Warren, p. 151.

[11]In Understanding Poetry, ed. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, 1st ed. rev. (New York, 1951), p. 558.

[12]The Poems of Richard Wilbur, (New York, 1966), p. 130.

[13]Samuel Johnson, "The Life of Pope," Lives of the English Poets (London, 1925), II, 219.

[14]Seven Types of Ambiguity, 3rd ed. (Cleveland, 1955), p. 16.